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The Southern Frontier

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The Poll Tax and Suffrage

The Poll Tax Is a Vote Tax

By JENNINGS PERRY*

In eight southern states the term poll tax is simply a euphemism for vote tax. If we call this tax by its true name, we will get rid of it sooner. For even the most egregious Tory will not have the gall to defend restriction and denial of the suffrage by direct taxation.

Actually the vote tax is doomed. When Henry Wallace declared to the Democratic National Convention that "the poll tax must go" it was not in rhetorical appeal. It was in recognition of the fact that we have bragged about democracy too much to continue by a tax device to sabotage the thing itself indefinitely.

The only question is When? Unfortunately it is a question the people themselves cannot answer. Only a few of the people can answer it—those who, in these eight states, have still a vote. The reform is one that must come from the top down for the simple reason that the bottom can't get at it. The minority electorates must realize that their very minority has placed *them* in thrall to piddling political machines that could not survive the weight of all the people.

The tax on voting violates every democratic principle and pretense, and the result of it cries out for enforcement of the Constitutional guarantee of a republican form of government in every state. For whether we pretend to democracy or to republicanism, we must postulate our assumption on a *right to vote*. And it is as certain as morning and night that you can't tax a right and have it too.

*Jennings Perry is editor of *The Nashville Tennessean* and author of *Democracy Begins at Home*, a book which is doing much to mobilize public opinion against the poll tax.

Newspapers and Negro Servicemen

The South Carolina Interracial Committee recently adopted the following resolution:

RESOLVED that it is the concensus of this meeting that the publication by the white press of South Carolina of news stories, articles, and pictures, fairly presenting the achievements of Negro members of the armed forces of the United States, would be a distinct contribution to the cause of improvement of race relations in this State; and the white press is, therefore, urged to give appropriate publicity to such accomplishments.

Figuring The Tax

Ten Million Disfranchised Southerners

State	Annual Poll Tax Payment	Maximum Poll Tax Payment	Day's work in lieu of Poll Tax Payment for man and wife 1 year delinquent	No. of Potential Voters Disfranchised (21 years of age and over by the poll tax, 1942) Negro	White	Total
Alabama	$1.50	$36.00	6¾	525,000	675,000	1,200,000
Arkansas	1.00	2.00	5	275,000	475,000	750,000
Georgia	1.00	47.47	4	600,000	750,000	1,350,000
Mississipi	2.00	6.00	11	575,000	325,000	900,000
South Carolina	1.00	1.05	2¼	400,000	350,000	750,000
Tennessee	1.00	2.58	3	300,000	900,000	1,200,000
Texas	1.00	1.75	2½	550,000	2,150,000	2,700,000
Virginia	1.50	5.01	4	375,000	775,000	1,150,000
Total Disfranchised				3,600,000	6,400,000	10,000,000

Abolishing The Tax

Action

Abolition of the poll tax depends upon effective action in each of the 8 states. Here are the legal ways summarized by the Southern Electoral Reform League.

ALABAMA. Amend the State constitution through action approved by 3/5 of the members of both houses and a majority of the voters at the next succeeding general or special election. Or, a constitutional convention may be called by a simple majority of the qualified voters.

ARKANSAS. Amend the State constitution through approved action by a majority of both houses and of the qualified voters at the next general election for senators and representatives.

GEORGIA. By majority vote of the legislature the statute imposing a poll tax can be repealed, thus leaving the constitution to require payment of a tax which no longer exists.

MISSISSIPPI. Amend the State constitution through action approved by 2/3 of the members of both houses for "3 several days" and by the majority of the qualified voters at "an election." The election must be preceded by 3 months public notice. If amendment is approved, it must be inserted in the constitution at the next succeeding session of the legislature.

SOUTH CAROLINA. After an amendment has been passed by 2/3 of both houses it must be submitted to a referendum of the electors at the next general election for representatives and then ratified by the majority of the members of the General Assembly at its next session. A Constitutional convention must be called by a 2/3 vote of the members of the General Assembly and a majority vote of the electors at the legislature following the referendum. The general Assembly shall provide for the calling of the convention.

TENNESSEE. An amendment must be passed by a majority of the members of the legislature, then referred to the legislature "next to be chosen" which must approve the amendment by a 2/3 vote. The amendment is next submitted to a referendum of the electors at an election time fixed by the General Assembly. (The unique experience of Tennessee in attempting to get rid of the poll tax by legislative action is told by Jennings Perry in his book *Democracy Begins at Home.*)

TEXAS. Amendment must be passed by 2/3 of each house at a biennial session and by a majority of the voters at an election to be fixed by the legislature within 3 months following the legislature's approval of the amendment.

VIRGINIA. An amendment must be passed by a majority of both houses and referred to the General Assembly at its first regular session held after the next general election for members of the House of Delegates. If the amendment is approved by any regular or special session of the General Assembly it must then be submitted to a vote of the qualified electors at an election to be fixed by the General Assembly.

"The right to vote must be open to all our citizens without tax or artificial restriction of any kind."—FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT.

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ATLANTA, GEORGIA, JANUARY, 1945

To attain through research and action programs the ideals and practices of equal opportunity for all peoples in the region.

Editorial

"The accursed refusal to face and discuss unpleasant facts" is said to be typical of the Southern Mind. A Southerner said it, so we have accepted it as true. However, the Committee of Editors and Writers of the South which met in Atlanta a few weeks ago to discuss the region's problems of political franchise gave the lie to what had been a hated truth. The South, they said, must begin to remedy a situation that made political serfs of 10,000,000 Southern people—and, lest that Southern Mind close too quickly, we hasten to add 6,400,000 of whom are white.

Several facts should be kept in mind when considering the poll tax in the South. Donald Strong of the University of Texas has said "The case for poll tax retention rests on folklore; the case for its abolition rests on propaganda, which is often more impassioned than exact." Many extravagant and lurid arguments have been made on both sides of the question. The basic problem of the poll tax in the South, however, is a simple one—it is a voting requirement. And while some secure Southerners may regard it as socially correct to have such a tax, many of us believe that it is unjust, undemocratic and disgraceful to do so.

Frankly, there should be little question about the poll tax as a revenue measure, though the argument has a hollow ring. Let us keep it for that purpose, if we must. Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Indiana do so. But let us eliminate it as a voting requirement!

The poll tax does not keep Negroes from voting. Though this belief is the unspoken major premise of many defenders of the tax, we Southerners know that "white supremacy" still prevails in the non-poll-tax Southern states. Georgia's former Governor, Eugene Talmadge, has seen through this ruse, and, knowing that the "white primary" still obtains, has come out for repeal of the poll tax in Georgia.

Is the tax needed for the support of schools in our communities? Mississippi has emphasized that argument. All right, let us keep the tax and improve the state's schools. North Carolina did that 25 years ago. The poll tax still supports education in that state but is no longer a prerequisite for voting.

Basically, the poll tax does disfranchise. It is a small amount, but among lower-income groups in the South, the masses of Southerners, the marginal utility of each $1.00, $1.50, or $2.00 of a poll tax is too great to permit its use for anything other than food, clothing, shelter, or riotous escape. We must eliminate the poll tax as a prerequisite of citizenship rights in these 8 Southern states in order that we may later eliminate the relative poverty that for millions of Southerners makes its payment such a strain toward decency.

EDITORIALLY SPEAKING

Regional Council Recommendations

The Atlanta Constitution
December 13, 1944

Members from all points of the South attended last week in Atlanta a meeting of the Southern Regional Council, which sponsors better race relations.

Enemies of better race relations consistently seek to present such meetings as secret, mysterious gatherings in which social equality is advocated. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The meetings are serious ones, always finding an aggressive, yet common-sense basis for discussion and agreement.

As illustrating that fact, the meeting of last week may be presented. A program basis of seven main points was adopted. No fair-minded, thoughtful person can quarrel with them. Indeed, only one of them conceivably would be opposed by a person with ultra-conservative views. Briefly, the points covered employment on the basis of ability, of Negro policemen and firemen, a practice already in effect in many southern cities where they work only in Negro areas and patrol only Negro districts; equalization of educational opportunities; increased publicly-financed medical and dental care to both races and enforcement of the law calling for equal accommodations on all public transportation facilities. Another called for an abolition of the white primary, where it exists. Arkansas already has done so, and in Texas the supreme court has ruled out such a primary. Other states are planning abandonment.

None of these "points" calls for, or intimates, any step toward so-called "social equality." Indeed, the "points" recognize legal segregation and ask only for what the law requires—equal facilities.

Positive, aggressive, yet conservative and non-radical, the program merits the attention of every southerner interested in the future of the South and its bi-racial problem.

Is Anti-Segregation The Aim?

Editor's Note: This was a lengthy editorial discussing the seven resolutions adopted at the last meeting of SRC. We have quoted the final paragraphs only.

Savannah Morning News
December 20, 1944

". . . The Southern Regional Council, whatever may be its humanitarian, 'liberal' or similarly designated intentions, should be reminded that in the South, where the negro population is larger than anywhere else in the nation, the principle of segregation has worked with such success that the South is not likely to abandon it. Such liberal New Deal newspapers as the Atlanta Constitution and the Atlanta Journal represent the sentiment of the average Southerner when they grant the need of improving the conditions of the negro as outlined in at least five of the council's seven points, but they insist that the principle of segregation must be maintained . . .

"It would be a tragic mistake if the Southern Regional Council, in its sincere effort to bring about improvement in the working and living conditions of the Southern negro should strive to veil its real intention to break down the bars of segregation by resorting to ambiguity at this time because as soon as such an intention becomes known—if such an intention exists—it will jeopardize all its other aims and purposes—and thoughtful Southerners would hate to see that happen.

"A word to the wise ought to be sufficient."

A Clean Slate

The Atlanta Daily World
December 10, 1944

Coincident with the appearance of our editorial last Friday, applauding the position of the Southern Regional Council on the equalization of teachers' salaries and the establishment of a permanent Committee on Fair Employment Practice, and in which we expressed disappointment over its failure to take similar action on the White Primary issue, a subsequent resolution appeared in which, not only was definite commitment on the abolition of the Primary taken, but an equally vigorous defense was made for the hiring of Negro police in the South and equality of transportation and travel for Negro citizens. Accordingly, therefore, it is our good fortune and our happy privilege to make this public acknowledgment, and further, to applaud the sincerity of the Council in its willingness to grapple with these and numerous other vexatious problems, now frustrating the Negro in his normal pursuit of the basic privileges of American democracy.

In utter fairness to Council therefore,

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Mr. Bridges Resigns

Editor's Note: On December 21 Mr. Francis Bridges of Tallahassee, Florida, tendered his resignation from the Council in a letter to Dr. Odum which we publish in full below with Mr. Bridges' permission.

"Dear Mr. Odum:

"It is with considerable regret that I write this letter.

"I had hoped that the Southern Regional Council was the organization which would attract southern white men and women who would be interested in a proper handling of the racial question. However, if I am able to judge by trends, the Council will not meet the problem and, therefore, will not attract into its membership those individuals whose support must be gained if the situation is adequately faced.

"Unless and until the minority group recognizes that the active support of influential white men and women must be gained, then their problems will be a continuing source of trouble to both races. They must realize that they have a responsibility, probably more than the white men and women.

"The members of the minority race and those people of the majority race who are interesting themselves in the racial question must be fair in their appraisal of situations. They must be able to view the entire picture.

"Please accept my resignation from Council membership, and I shall appreciate your issuing instructions that my name be stricken from all material which comes from the central office.

"It has been a great pleasure for me to know you personally, and I can assure you that I will continue my efforts as an individual and as a constitutional officer of the State of Florida to carry out what I think is the right thing in connection with interracial matters.

"I think my attitude is correctly reflected in a human relations code written by my late mother just before her recent death. That code is as follows:

> 'I believe in the separateness of races; in the integrity of races. By integrity I mean the state of being entire; unimpaired; complete; sound. I believe in the separateness, the integrity, of each and every race, the black, the brown, the yellow, the red, the white.
>
> 'I believe in justice, and equal opportunity for all the children of men, without thought of superiority, or inferiority. God made of one blood all nations upon earth, and it is presumptuous for any race to claim superiority for itself, or to ascribe inferiority to any other race.
>
> 'We have ruined the word segregation by our ignorance, our misinterpretation of it, our selfishness, so I use the word separateness.
>
> 'I believe in the separateness, the integrity of races.'

"With kindest personal regards, I am

Yours sincerely

FRANCIS R. BRIDGES."

Needed: A Rebirth of Abolition

By EDWARD GUY FRANCIS

Editor's Note: In one of his letters to us Mr. Francis remarked that "What the South needs is a rebirth of the spirit of abolition," so we asked him to write a brief article on this subject. We invite our readers to send us brief discussions of his article.

Mr. Francis, who lives at Anchorage, Kentucky, says "When people hear me speak of the Negro as being the equal of the White man, they nearly always get around to the question, 'Are you really a Southerner?' It may interest you to know that my people were Virginians dating from Jamestown and were slaveholders on both sides; that I was raised in Nashville, and that my uncle was an original Ku Klux. However, my grandfather was a Virginian who disbelieved in slavery and served the Union in the Civil War!"

From the beginning of the Republic, men of good will wrestled with the problem of slavery. Many well-laid schemes were advanced to ameliorate it and the evils and disunity resulting therefrom, but in vain, for the facts of slavery in any form or degree were irreconcilable with the principles of Christian morality.

Spirit of Abolition

The events which led up to Emancipation were, in the final analysis, brought about chiefly by the efforts of the Abolitionists, that zealous group who were adamant in their purpose to free the slaves. Though they were always few in number, they started the flames of righteous indignation which eventually fired the heart of the nation to abolish slavery. They saw the problem of slavery, not as many pictured it, in terms of the history, geography, and agricultural economics peculiar to the South, but in the realistic terms of right and wrong in the relations between man and his fellowman. William Lloyd Garrison epitomized the fervent spirit of Abolition when he wrote in *The Liberator* in 1831, "On this subject I do not wish to speak or write with moderation."

Abolition eventually brought about Emancipation but, sad to say, as a result of human frailty in both the North and the South, Emancipation did not fully emancipate, and a substitute for slavery was allowed to grow up under the misleading and all-embracing name of segregation.

As before, men have wrestled with the problems of segregation, and although some notable progress has been made, present-day thinking is still in many respects similar to that which preceded the Civil War. Thoughtful leaders are now seeking partial solutions to segregation by ameliorating it and considering it from many standpoints—regional, social, political, agricultural, economic, scientific, and latest of all, from the standpoint of labor unionism. All of this is good, but it misses the fundamental point which is a moral

(*Continued on Page* 4)

Public Education in Atlanta

By GRACE TOWNS HAMILTON

An example of how a community may study a problem, present its findings and intelligently build for effective community action is indicated in a recent *Report of Public school Facilities for Negroes in Atlanta, Georgia,** published by the Atlanta Urban League. The report based its recommendations on the following principles:

1. There should exist and be available for Negro children the same types of educational opportunities as there are for white children.
2. The teacher-pupil ratio in Negro schools should be as low as that in schools for white children.
3. The length of the school day should be the same for the Negro child as it is for the white child.
4. The same types of physical accommodations and facilities in the public schools should exist and be available for Negro children as for white children.

An editorial in *The Atlanta Journal* under the title "Light on a Basic Problem" comments, "A REPORT presented to the Atlanta Board of Education by the Atlanta Urban League throws much light on a fundamental community problem, the inadequacy of public school opportunities for Negro children. According to figures compiled by the League, Atlanta ranks in this respect behind such Southern cities as Houston, Jacksonville, Nashville and Dallas, although it has a greater Negro school population per thousand than these cities. For instance, Atlanta with 26,528 Negro school population, has only .5 schools per 1,000 population while Houston, with only 18,000 Negro school population, has 1.7 schools per 1,000; and Jacksonville, with 10,046 Negro school children population, has 2.6 schools per 1,000.

"The analysis shows further that Negro children, comprising more than one-third of the total school age population, have only 20 per cent of the 65 public school buildings; that the total 1941-42 per-pupil expenditure for Negroes was $37.80 as against $108.70 for white pupils; that public school property represents an investment of $887 for each Negro pupil as against $2,156 for each white pupil; that under the 'double-session' system in overcrowded Negro schools the pupils receive only three and one-half hours' instruction daily while the white pupil gets the full six hours. The analysis points up many other comparable discrepancies, in library, public health, vocational training, and other school facilities.

"While these are unpleasant facts, we think they deserve the public's attention as well as that of the Board of Education. If Atlanta is duly to progress, the progress will have to be measured in terms of her entire population, not in terms of two-thirds. . . . The League has presented a

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*Copies of *A Report of Public School Facilities for Negroes in Atlanta, Georgia,* may be had upon request from the Atlanta Urban League, 239 Auburn Avenue, Northeast, Room 400, Atlanta 3, Georgia.

Negro Churchmen

The Commission on the Church and Minority Peoples of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America has distributed a statement signed by more than one hundred Negro churchmen entitled "Negro Churchmen Speak to White Churchmen". The statement, prepared by a Committee of the Commission's Negro members of which Dr. Benjamin E. Mays was chairman, comments as follows on "Responsibility for Post War Conflict":

> At the close of World War I, race riots broke out. They broke out in the North and in the South. There are many reasons for these race riots. We mention only two:
>
> a. The Negro had been led to believe that he was fighting to make the world safe for democracy. He went abroad and fought for it. He experienced democratic treatment in Europe and particularly in France. The president of the United States, and Negro and White leaders led Negroes to believe that things were going to be better on their return to this country. But conditions were not better. In many instances they were worse. Negroes were told that the war was over . . . settle down and accept the same old ways to which they were accustomed.
>
> b. There was little or no indication of the intention of Government or the American people to improve the Negro's condition after World War I. There was no serious attempt to make things better. Hopeful expectation on the part of the Negro was met with determined resistance on the part of many white Americans. Race riots were the inevitable result.

Much more important is the lag between the development capacities of Negroes and the slow change in the treatment of Negroes. In all too many areas, Negroes are treated now as they were fifty and seventy-five years ago. Here is a task for Negro and white ministers. Ministers and other church leaders should take the lead today in calling upon governors, chiefs of police, mayors, and all the officials and employees of public carriers to urge them to be just and humane in their treatment of all soldiers now and when they return to their respective communities after the war, and during the period of readjustment and rehabilitation. Ministers should preach a similar gospel in their pulpits. Too many of the present and post-war interracial proposals are negative in character. They aim to keep down race riots by having the armed officials of the law on the alert without seeking first to remove the causes that make for conflict. Ministers should not only advocate law and order, but they should work for justice and fair play for all the people. Only this condition enables law and order to be permanently maintained.

Public Education in Atlanta

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tremendous problem to the Board of Education and to the entire community. The report deserves earnest and sympathetic study."

The Atlanta Constitution commenting editorially upon the recommendations concludes, "The cost would be great, but Atlanta, searching its heart and conscience, can no longer hide the fact of this discrimination and cannot further support it. A beginning should be made toward solving this, one of our great problems of justice and right, looking toward the improvement of our whole community."

Appreciation, both of the facts revealed and of the press' support of the findings, has come from other communities. *The Milwaukee Journal* writes editorially: "For *The Atlanta Journal* loudly to condemn the situation and demand action to improve school facilities for Negro children is further heartening proof of a growing concern among the white leaders of the deep South over the welfare of the colored population.

"The vigorous stand of one outstanding Southerner or one leading Southern newspaper can be expected to influence more local public opinion, to bestir more real progress toward better race relations, than the most vehement denunciations that emanate from points north of the Mason and Dixon Line.

"Such a voice has long been needed. More power to it."

With this idea all socially minded people are in complete accord. And in Atlanta it is evident that thoughtful citizens are preparing to assume their obligations for the total welfare of their communities, when the areas of need are objectively presented and when courses of action within their reach are indicated.

A Clean Slate

(*Continued from Page* 2)

and for the information of our readers, we find it pertinent to review their findings in briefest outline: "1. There should exist and be made available for Negro children the same types of educational opportunities as there are for white children. 2. The teacher-pupil ratio in Negro schools should be as low as that in schools for white children. 3. Length of school days should be the same for Negro children as for white children. 4. The same type of physical accommodations and facilities for children in public schools should exist for Negro as are available for white children. 5. Employment of all persons on the basis of ability, with due regards for seniority rights. 6. Abolition of the White Primary. 7. Extension of the growing practice of employment of Negro policemen and firemen in southern cities and equal treatment of members of both races by the police and the courts. 8. Equalization of educational opportunities. 9. Extension of publicly financed low cost housing. 10. Increased publicly financed medical and dental care available to both races on an equal basis. 11. That accommodations for Negroes as provided under the law, be actually provided on all public transportation facilities, and that discriminatory practices now common in travel be abolished."

For this clear enunciation of principles this paper commends the Southern Regional Council and votes it a clean bill in its modus operandi of the future.

Needed: A Rebirth of Abolition

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one, i.e., segregation is unchristian and morally wrong.

Christianity and Segregation

The spirit of the teachings of Christ has been most clearly embodied in the simple and majestic words of The Declaration of Independence, "—all men are created equal." There is here no halfway ground; we either do believe it or else we don't, and much of the hope of humanity today rests in the probability that we do.

Segregation runs head-on against the principle of equality, and hence against Christianity itself, because, regardless of what excuse may be made for it on so-called practical grounds, it is based upon the assumption that the Negro is inferior and upon the purpose to keep him so. To this we must oppose the unequivocal truth that as all men are created equal, then the Negro and the White man are created equal. We cannot achieve a world-wide rule of justice and equality while reserving to the South the right to practice injustice and inequality.

Individual practical and material steps toward the partial improvement of conditions should be pushed, of course, but they should be recognized as secondary and as means to an end rather than as ends in themselves.

To achieve the goal of equality, which is part of the Christian goal of the Brotherhood of Man, we must aim straight at that goal. We must seek to arouse the deep religious sense of the mass of Southern people to a righteous indignation against that which is wrong.

We Southerners need a rebirth of Abolition.

Federal Council of Churches

Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, President of Morehouse College, Atlanta, and Southern Regional Council member, has been elected Vice President of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America.

President Mays is a native of South Carolina, a graduate of Bates College and the University of Chicago.

Episcopal Churchmen

The Synod of the Fourth Province of the Protestant Episcopal Church at its meeting in Nashville during October "Resolved: that the Synod commend to the attention and active cooperation of the various Departments of Christian Social Relations the work of the Southern Regional Council."